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ABSTRACT

This Digest summarizes what is known about the use of positive behavioral support (PBS) and functional analysis (FA) to change the behaviors of students with a variety of disabilities. The paper notes that both PBS and FA differ from traditional behavioral management in focusing on systems, settings, and lack of skill. The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires or strongly recommends PBS and FA strategies. Research findings on the use of PBS demonstrate the method's wide applicability and effectiveness (it reduces problem behavior by 80 percent in two-thirds of cases). Classroom techniques to support positive behaviors include altering environments when useful, explicitly teaching new skills, and genuinely appreciating positive behaviors. Implementation of the PBS model on a school-wide basis focuses on providing school-wide support, specific setting support, classroom support, and individual student support. School-wide strategies might include a set of positively stated expectations for behavior and a continuum of procedures for discouraging violations. Research on the use of FA with young children suggests that environmental manipulations such as increased teacher praise and reinforcement for appropriate behavior improved student behaviors. The paper concludes with a short list of positive supports to be used when addressing challenging behaviors. (DB)

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POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT AND FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT

By

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Positive Behavior Support and Functional Assessment

Cynthia Warger

Fighting, biting, hitting, scratching, kicking, screaming—as well as extreme withdrawal—are behaviors that challenge even the best educators and families. For years, researchers and practitioners alike have asked the question: Why does a particular child act that way?

Unlike traditional behavioral management, which views the individual as the problem and seeks to "fix" him or her by quickly eliminating the challenging behavior, positive behavioral support (PBS) and functional analysis (FA) view systems, settings, and lack of skill as parts of the "problem" and work to change those. As such, these approaches are characterized as long-term strategies to reduce inappropriate behavior, teach more appropriate behavior, and provide contextual supports necessary for successful outcomes.

PBS and FA can help practitioners and parents understand why the challenging behavior occurs—its function or purpose for the individual. In addition to helping practitioners and families understand the individual with the challenging behavior, PBS and FA also help them understand the physical and social contexts of the behavior. Moreover, PBS and FA provide a framework for helping the child to change challenging behaviors.

The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires the IEP team to consider using PBS to address behavior that impedes the child's learning and/or the learning of others [§ 614 (d)(3)(B)]. In addition, IDEA requires that a functional behavioral assessment be conducted for a student either before or not later than 10 days after a disciplinary action [§ 615 (k)(1)(B)(ii)]. A functional behavioral assessment ensures that the student's behavioral intervention plan is designed to meet that child's unique needs.

Research—much of it supported by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)—has demonstrated that PBS and FA are effective in assisting students with challenging behaviors. The following sections describe some of this research.

What Do We Know About Positive Behavioral Support?

A synthesis of more than 100 research articles that involved individuals with various cognitive disabilities found that

- PBS is widely applicable to individuals with serious challenging behaviors.
- Research in PBS is rapidly contributing to our knowledge of how to use the results of assessments and how to correct environmental deficiencies.
- PBS is effective in reducing problem behavior by 80 percent in two-thirds of the cases.
- Success rates are higher when intervention is based on prior functional assessment (Carr, as reported by the Beach Center on Families and Disability, 1998).

Many teachers already take the following actions, which have been identified by research as supporting positive behaviors:

- Respond to individual needs. PBS requires that services and programs are responsive to the preferences, strengths, and needs of individuals with challenging behavior. For example, some school systems may need to add self-determination skills to their curriculum.
- Alter environments. If something in the individual's environment influences the challenging behavior, it is important to organize the environment for success. For example, clearly defined work places and quiet work areas may assist a child who is noise-sensitive.
- Explicitly teach new skills to the individual with challenging behavior and members of his or her social network. Individuals frequently need to learn alternative, appropriate responses that serve the same purpose as the challenging behavior.
- Genuinely appreciate positive behaviors. It is important to reinforce and acknowledge all positive behaviors consistently.

School-wide Positive Behavioral Support

Research studies have demonstrated that when PBS strategies are implemented school-wide, children with and without disabilities benefit by having an environment that is conducive to learning. They learn more about their own behavior, learn to work together, and support each other as a community of learners.

One PBS model, Effective Behavioral Support (Sugai, 1996), emphasizes a school-wide system that defines, teaches, and encourages appropriate behavior in children in elementary and middle schools. This model is based on the fact that about 85 percent of students have the social skills to do quite well if placed in a reasonable environment.

To address the behavioral support needs of all students within a school context, this model considers support from four major perspectives:

- School-wide support—procedures and processes that are intended for all students, all staff, and all settings. The most important element of support is a building-wide team that oversees all development, implementation, modification, and evaluation activities.
- Specific setting support—a team-based mechanism for monitoring specific settings that exist within the school environment. In settings where problem behaviors occur, teams should develop strategies that prevent or minimize their occurrence.
- Classroom support—processes and procedures of the individual classrooms where teachers structure learning opportunities. Classroom support should parallel the PBS features and procedures that are used school-wide.

Individual student support—immediate, relevant, effective, and efficient responses to those students who present the most significant behavioral challenges. There must be processes and procedures for

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high-intensity, specially designed and individualized interventions for the estimated 3-7 percent of students who present the most challenging behavior.

Strategies for the school-wide, specific setting, and classroom levels include having:

- A clearly stated, positive purpose.
- A set of positively stated expectations for behavior.
- Procedures for teaching school-wide expectations.
- A continuum of procedures for encouraging students to display expected behaviors.
- A continuum of procedures for discouraging violations of school-wide expectations.
- A method for monitoring implementation and effectiveness.

At the student level, procedures include functional assessment strategies, social skills instruction, self-management training, and direct instruction. For implementation of the procedures at the individual student level to be effective, the school-wide PBS system must be in place and functioning efficiently.

Fern Ridge Middle School in Elmira, Oregon, experienced a 42 percent drop in office referrals in one year's time after implementing Effective Behavioral Support (see Taylor-Greene et al., 1997). Three levels of PBS were implemented:

- Level 1: This preventive level provided the necessary supports to 80-90 percent of the student population. Staff defined their expectations for student behavior-called "High Five." At the beginning of the year, staff directly taught the skills underlying these expectations. Students then practiced the appropriate behaviors with reinforcement and feedback. A school-wide token economy system was put into place to reinforce students throughout the year.
- Level 2: Some students needed more structure to help them solve problems and set goals. These students attended daily morning check-in and afternoon check-out sessions with counseling staff. Students carried a point card on which teachers awarded points when the youngster demonstrated the High Five expectations. The card is brought to the counselor at the end of each day and sent home to families. An individualized behavioral education plan (BEP) also was developed for these students.
- Level 3: Intensive support and additional structure were provided to students who were not succeeding. To support these students, a more intensive BEP was developed.

Using Functional Assessment with Young Children

Research on the use of functional assessment with young children includes case studies of efforts to improve the social and behavioral performance of young children identified as having behavior risks in Head Start and kindergarten classrooms (Kamps et al., 1995). The functional assessment of environmental events allowed researchers to prescribe appropriate interventions.

The results of the case studies were encouraging. Children's behaviors improved over time as a result of environmental manipulations including:

- Increased teacher praise and reinforcement for appropriate behavior and peer interaction.
- Decreased teacher attention for inappropriate behavior.
- More structure in classroom routines and rule following.

Kamps recommends that practitioners consider incorporating the following positive supports when addressing challenging behaviors:

- Direct instruction of appropriate behavior and social rules.
- Use of behaviorally appropriate role models.
- Use of concrete, visual examples of positive interaction and play.
- Consistent, frequent reinforcement of prosocial behaviors.
- Incidental teaching and reinforcement of appropriate behaviors; redirection of antisocial behaviors.

Resources

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